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**When Others' Performance Just Isn't Good Enough:
Educational Leaders' Framing of Concerns in Private and
Public**

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When Others' Performance Just Isn't Good Enough:

Educational Leaders' Framing of Concerns in Private and Public

Abstract

Effective instructional leadership demands that leaders address the inevitable problems and concerns that exist in any educational organization. Unfortunately, much evidence suggests that many important concerns, including teacher performance issues, continue to be unaddressed and unresolved. This article portrays the nature of concerns facing 77 educational leaders about others' performance and the variable effectiveness of their attempts to resolve them in both private and public contexts. The majority of concerns identified by these leaders were about behavioral issues, with others being about attitudes, relationships, effectiveness, and capability. Concerns were found to persist longer than is desirable, and leaders reported difficulty in resolving them.

INTRODUCTION

Educational leaders invariably face situations in which those for whom they are responsible cause them concern. Concerns about others' performance or behavior are inevitable for those in educational leadership roles, whether they be a superintendent (Honig, 2012; Lamkin, 2006; Orr, 2006); a principal (Robinson & Le Fevre, 2011); or other member of a school's leadership team. In this article, we examine the nature of those concerns, and how leaders frame them, so that we might better understand how they might be resolved in the interests of both adults and children in school settings.

We define the concept of "concern" in this research as a situation in which the performance of a staff member for whom they are responsible is perceived as unsatisfactory and as requiring their involvement in addressing it. Concerns arise from what leaders variously describe as problems, dilemmas, challenges, or tough situations. We exclude, in our definition of concerns, those which are not directly about an individual and their performance; for example, concerns about groups and organizational, policy, or system situations. It is an intentionally broad definition, since, regardless of the terminology, addressing and effectively resolving such situations is a key task for which educational leaders are accountable and responsible. The resolution of concerns about teaching is central to the task of instructional leadership. The leadership practices associated with improved learning and teaching; such as goal setting, strategic resourcing, ensuring quality teaching, leading teacher learning and development, and ensuring a safe and orderly environment (Robinson, 2011) are likely to be much more difficult in contexts in which there are unresolved concerns. Conversely, when contexts are characterized by effective concern resolution, the conditions are likely to be more conducive to leaders' work of improving teaching and learning. Understanding more about the concerns that leaders face, and how they frame them is, therefore, important to the field of educational leadership.

In this article, we first consider the importance of concern resolution in relation to school leaders' role as instructional leaders with responsibility for the improvement of teaching and learning (Robinson, 2010; Robinson, 2011). Next, we consider concern resolution from an accountability perspective by highlighting where either resolving concerns, or the associated notions of solving problems, addressing issues, or managing conflict, are referred to in various sets of leadership standards. Both of these literatures (instructional leadership and accountability) are used to emphasize the relevance and importance of studying the concerns of educational leaders. We then turn our attention to empirical evidence about educational leaders' capabilities in relation to concern resolution and introduce three theoretical frames relevant to concerns that inform our research—face-to-face accountability, attitude theory, and a theory of interpersonal effectiveness. Finally, we report our study on the nature and framing of concerns facing educational leaders in the school contexts in which they work.

The situations that cause concern to educational leaders usually have consequences for students. Some concerns are directly related to students' learning (for example a concern about a teacher's ability to teach math, or about a principal's attitude toward teacher professional learning). Others, such as a concern about a school office administrator's manner with parents, or an administrator's tendency for lateness, have a more indirect relationship to students' learning. Regardless of whether concerns have direct or indirect implications for student learning, their resolution is a key task of instructional leadership.

Concerns are not, in and of themselves, entirely undesirable since they have the potential to prompt efforts toward positive change. As Dunning (2009) reminds us, "all schools manifest problems to some degree and their occurrence and impact should not necessarily be interpreted as evidence of ineffectiveness or failure on the part of their head teachers" (p. 75). The timely resolution of concerns, though, is a core responsibility of educational leaders, not only because standards for evaluating principals require it, but also because their persistence is likely to undermine the goals of instructional leadership. Principals need to both recognize the endemic nature of problems in school organizations and ensure their impact is minimized. As Robinson (2011) explains "the improvement of teaching and learning requires leaders at *all levels* [emphasis added] to address concerns they have about the performance of staff for whom they are responsible" (p. 37). We draw attention here to the point about "all levels" of leadership because concern resolution is as important for those working at the district or regional level as for those leading schools or school teams. For example, Honig (2012) concluded on the basis of observations, document analysis, and interviews with 162 leaders at school and district level that the way in which central office administrators managed tensions was related to the quality of their support for instructional leadership. When central office staff had difficulty managing tensions, support for principals' instructional leadership was inconsistent, or negligible. In contrast, where those tensions were well managed by central office staff, support for instructional leadership was consistent.

Effective resolution of concerns is also likely to be positively associated with student achievement. Such effectiveness contributes to perceptions of competence, and perceived competence is one important determinant of teachers' trust in principals. Furthermore, there is "strong statistical evidence linking relational trust to improvements in student learning" (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 115). Bryk and Schneider (2002) explain that, "a serious deficiency on any one criterion [respect, competence, personal regard for others and integrity] can be sufficient to undermine a discernment of trust for the overall relationship" (p. 23). In school organizations where there is a pattern of concerns being ignored, mishandled, or left unresolved, there are likely to be lower levels of interpersonal trust because "gross incompetence . . . is corrosive to trust relations. Allowed to persist in a school community, incompetence will undermine collective efforts toward improvement" (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 25). Where there is a pattern of concerns being

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effectively handled, interpersonal trust between teachers and leaders is likely to be greater (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011). It is clear that school leaders' competence at resolving concerns matters, not just for adults, but also for students.

EDUCATIONAL LEADERS' ACCOUNTABILITY FOR CONCERN RESOLUTION

Increasingly, school leaders are being held accountable for the resolution of concerns in the organizations they lead. This is evident, in particular, through the prominence of concern resolution (or related capabilities) in the standards for school leadership set out by national bodies in many countries. Generally, standards recognize principals' and other school leaders' accountability for promoting the achievement of educational goals and success for all learners. They typically also refer to leaders' skills or actions in resolving concerns to ensure that those educational goals are not compromised.

In Australia, for example, there is explicit reference to principals' interpersonal skills and, in particular, their ability to "manage themselves well and use ethical practices and social skills to deal with conflict effectively" (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011, p. 7). In New Zealand, a framework for school leadership (Ministry of Education, 2008) outlines that "identifying, analyzing and solving problems that occur in schools" is a key activity (p. 17). The associated professional standards for both secondary and primary principals require that principals "manage conflict and other challenging situations effectively, and actively work to achieve solutions" and that they apply "critical inquiry and problem solving" (Ministry of Education & New Zealand's Post Primary Teachers' Association, 2011, p. 53). In England, two of the headteacher standards dimensions relate to concern resolution. In the dimension of "leading teaching and learning," one standard requires headteachers to "acknowledge excellence and challenge poor performance across the school" (Department for Education & Skills, 2004, p. 7). The dimension of "developing self and working with others," includes standards about both managing conflict and challenging others to attain high goals. In addition, the standards require that headteachers "take appropriate actions when performance is unsatisfactory" (Department for Education & Skills, 2004, p. 8). In the United States, conflict management or problem solving are not specifically mentioned in the standards for school leaders, but are implied in the combination of standards that require leaders to "supervise instruction" (p. 14), "develop the instructional and leadership capacity of staff," "monitor and evaluate the impact of the instructional program," and "ensure a system of accountability for every student's academic success" (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008,

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pp. 14–15). If that monitoring were to give rise to concerns about teaching effectiveness, the standard about accountability would require concerns to be addressed.

The draft standard for headship and middle leaders in the Scottish system also highlights the importance of concern resolution (Scottish Executive Education Department, 2005). School leaders are expected to manage self and others effectively, and display “confidence and courage in the way they deal with criticism and conflict” (p. 7). In addition, they are required to “take a positive solution-focused approach to their work towards resolution” (p. 7) so that they can judge wisely and decide appropriately.

While the terminology and emphases differ across nations, there is a pattern in leadership standards that indicates widespread recognition of the importance of principals being competent in addressing and resolving concerns.

LEADERS' CAPABILITIES IN RESOLVING CONCERNS

Despite the widespread international recognition of the significance of resolving concerns, leaders' capabilities in doing so are often limited. As a consequence, addressing concerns typically presents a challenge to leaders regardless of the level of leadership involved. Honig (2012), for example, reports that “central office administrators likely struggle to help principals improve their instructional leadership” (p. 738). Hubbard, Mehan, and Stein's (2006) findings from a San Diego context give some insight into the cause of that struggle. Longstanding institutional patterns of practice focused on operational matters rather than instructional support led superintendents to focus more on the operational aspects of their role. In addition, the superintendents' capacity meant they were less able to provide effective instructional support than they were to ensure that organizational tasks were completed.

Just as superintendents struggle to address improvement concerns with principals, principals also struggle to address concerns with their teaching staff. It is claimed that the number of teachers receiving unsatisfactory evaluations is far less than the number of unsatisfactory teachers (Pajak & Arrington, 2004). The capability of principals in problem solving and addressing concerns is key to reducing that gap.

Several studies that compare the problem solving of expert principals with novice or typical principals (Brenninkmeyer & Spillane, 2008; Leithwood & Steinbach, 1993; Leithwood & Stager, 1989) and aspiring principals (Spillane, White, & Stephan, 2009) provide insight into issues of capability for problem solving—both the capability of those deemed less-than-expert principals' (novice, typical, or aspiring) and for principals generally. Since problem-solving capability is central to leaders' responses

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to concerns, the findings of these studies are relevant to the research reported here. Leithwood and Stager's (1989) study required 22 principals (six expert and 16 non-expert) to select two problems from a set of six possibilities—the one they thought clearest (structured) and least clear (unstructured). They were asked, among other things, to describe in detail their solutions to those problems. Analysis of those responses provided the bases for outlining distinctions between expert and typical processes, and some of those distinctions are revealing in terms of how leaders frame concerns.

Typical principals were more concerned about the consequences for themselves, rather than for school and student achievement, and perceived difficult problems as frightening and stressful, rather than manageable. They tended to make assumptions about the problem rather than collect information and tended to assume that others shared their assumptions. Typical principals were more concerned than expert principals with keeping stakeholders (parents) happy. The expert principals were more concerned with providing them with knowledge. They also perceived more constraints than expert principals and were less likely to see how these constraints could be overcome. Furthermore, typical principals felt fearful about whether they could solve the problem, whereas expert principals were calm and confident.

Similar issues in the interpretation and framing of problems were identified in a qualitative study of nine principals a few years later (Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995). This time, findings were based on principal interview data gathered before and after a staff meeting in which the school leaders attempted to address a real problem. Once again, the issues of assuming rather than checking assumptions, not seeking others' interpretations, and being primarily concerned with one's own goals were apparent with typical principals. In addition, typical principals, unlike expert principals, tended to treat problems in isolation from other problems and goals, to have difficulty explaining their view, to anticipate fewer obstacles, and to frame them as major impediments.

In a later study, Brenninkmeyer and Spillane (2008) also examined differences in problem-solving processes between expert and typical principals. Unlike most of the earlier researchers, Brenninkmeyer and Spillane focused on instructional rather than administrative problem scenarios. In contrast to expert principals' problem-solving processes, typical principals tended to use weak anecdotes, perceive constraints (with a focus on how teachers might resist or challenge them), avoid conflict (by suggesting, for example, the appropriateness of not changing things in the first year of a new appointment); make assumptions (for example that teachers should use a particular assessment because they don't know how to teach reading); and emphasize

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concern for feelings (ensuring that teachers are not made to feel uncomfortable, for example). There were no statistically significant differences between expert and typical principals for most of the problem-solving variables they considered. Despite the lack of statistically significant differences, the direction of differences was as expected, with higher scores for the expert than the typical group. The non-significant difference between the less and more expert principals suggests that concern resolution may be a challenge for leaders with varying degrees of experience and expertise.

Research about the differences in principals' problem solving strategies (Spillane et al., 2009) has revealed five distinct differences between expert and aspiring principals' problem-solving processes. Three of those differences were in the direction expected by the researchers. First, experts used a local solution as distinct from a global one in 52% of responses compared to just 1% for aspiring principals. Second, experts used a relevant anecdote in 48% of their responses, whereas aspiring principals used one in only 12% of their responses. Third, expert principals were more likely than aspiring principals to engage in analyzing the scenario by questioning, critiquing, or disagreeing with the structure of the scenario: they did so in 23% of responses compared to just 6% for aspiring principals. Two additional findings were in an unexpected direction—experts were more likely to make an assumption about the problem (they did so 30% of the time, while aspiring principals did so only 11% of the time) and experts were less likely to have a long-term outlook compared with aspiring principals (experts attended to the long-term implications or direction of the situation in only 9% of responses, while aspiring principals did so in 23% of responses).

A possible explanation offered by the researchers was that “experts do not perceive these scenarios to be ill-structured but rather routine and thus quickly narrow the problem with a broad generalization” (Spillane et al., p. 139). Early framing of a problem as routine or structured, rather than ill-structured, leads them to make untested assumptions about how to frame the problem, and this limits their understanding of the problem and of the solution possibilities. Spillane et al. (2009) also identified weaknesses overall in principals' problem-solving processes—in particular low levels of facing conflict and high levels of avoiding conflict.

There is also evidence to suggest that principals are challenged when dealing with concerns involving parental complaints. Robinson and Le Fevre (2011) studied the interpersonal effectiveness of principals engaging in challenging conversations with parents. They found that principals “were more skilled in advocating their own position than in deeply inquiring into and checking their understanding of the views of the parent. Many had difficulty respectfully challenging the parent's assumptions and reaching a shared understanding of what to do next” (p. 227).

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Taken together, the findings from these studies suggest that leaders in a range of contexts have lower than desirable levels of capability for solving problems and resolving concerns about others.

THE NATURE OF ISSUES WARRANTING SCHOOL LEADER CONCERN

Having considered the importance of leaders effectively addressing concerns in school settings, and issues in their capability in doing so, we now turn to consideration of the prevalence and substance of such concerns.

The need to deal with concerns about underperformance is a relatively routine demand on principals, particularly on those working to turn around low-performing schools (Duke & Salmonowicz, 2010). It seems reasonable to predict that leaders might have concerns about the performance of between five and ten percent of teachers. That is the proportion of teachers who have been found in studies from across several countries to be either incompetent or at least underperforming (Bridges, 1986; Painter, 2000; Rhodes & Beneicke, 2003; Stoelinga, 2010; Wragg, Haynes, Wragg, & Chamberlin, 2000; Yariv, 2004). Other studies point to much higher levels of concern about teacher performance. For example, Duke, Tucker, Salmonowicz, and Levy's (2007) analysis of problematic conditions that inhibit school improvement, for example, found that there were problems of ineffective instruction in 16 of the 19 schools studied. The same study also identified the prevalence of problems relating to personnel, student reading achievement, dysfunctional culture, and lack of teamwork.

Principals also report concerns about teacher resistance (Knight, 2009; Menuey, 2007; Zimmerman, 2006) changes in personnel (Dunning, 1996, 2009), and weaknesses in others' relational skills such as communication with colleagues, students and parents (Painter, 2000; Yariv, 2004). Regardless of the type or seriousness of the concerns, they matter—issues faced by school leaders in managing people issues can be persistent and difficult to resolve, and therefore have wide-ranging negative consequences (Bridges, 1990; Cardno, 2007).

THEORIES THAT INFORM EXPLANATIONS ABOUT WEAKNESSES IN CONCERN RESOLUTION

Given the prevalence of issues warranting the concern of leaders, weak capability in addressing concerns is a significant educational problem. In considering how to describe those weaknesses, we turn in the next section to two theories that help us determine what to notice about the way leaders

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frame their concerns about others: a theory of face-to-face accountability and attitude theory.

Face-to-Face Accountability: Private Thought Versus Public Presentation

One possible explanation for the lack of effectiveness in addressing and resolving concerns may be the way in which concerns are framed when leaders raise them face-to-face with the person they are about. In face-to-face contexts, leaders are likely to feel accountability pressure, that is, pressure to justify their views. As Tetlock and Boettger (1989) suggest, accountability may induce a cautious response set whereby people become unwilling to make assertions that might prove difficult to justify. They maintain that accountability "turns people into fence-sitters who rarely stray from the safe midpoints of the scales on which they express judgments" (p. 389). In other words, despite having serious concerns about a subordinate's practice, educational leaders may moderate their views when they publicly disclose them. That moderation occurs because they anticipate and seek to avoid being held to account for the strength and content of the concern. The challenge of face-to-face accountability is reduced when a concern is expressed more diplomatically.

In James and Vince's (2001) study, head teachers did stray beyond the "safe midpoint," but typically toward the positive end of the scale. In their study of the negative emotions associated with the leadership role, they identified head-teacher anxiety in carrying out their role "and the consequent tendency to avoid anxiety by accentuating the positive" (James & Vince, 2001, p. 313). This tendency was also found in earlier studies (Bridges, 1990; Klimoski & Inks, 1990) and in particular in situations in which a supervisor anticipated face-to-face feedback sharing with a subordinate. That anticipation promoted "even greater accountability to that subordinate (and therefore the potential for greater rating distortion) than situations in which performance feedback is not to be transmitted in a face-to-face meeting." The distortion was "toward what the rater perceives the ratee's wishes or expectations to be. This, we would argue, in most cases, will be in an upward (more positive) direction" (Klimoski & Inks, 1990, p. 197). Positive leniency of this sort (inflated ratings) arises from a desire to avoid the time, effort, and unpleasantness involved in dealing with incompetence (Bridges, 1990; Klimoski & Inks, 1990).

Fence-sitting, moderating views, and positive leniency all contribute, at least in part, to the lack of success in resolving concerns since they each involve a lack of transparency about the true nature of the concern. Unresolved concerns, in turn, are an issue in educational organizations because persistent concerns are almost certain to impede the development of conditions in schools that are conducive to effective teaching and learning.

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To understand more about the nature of those concerns, and to establish a way of analyzing them, we turn next to attitude theory.

Attitude Theory

Attitudes are “the fundamental orientation to evaluate people, other living beings, things, events, and ideas along a good–bad dimension” (Banaji & Heiphetz, 2010, p. 382). Evaluating others is, for school leaders, not only an orientation but a key activity for which they are accountable and an activity that may give rise to concerns. Concerns, as we focus on in this study, arise from school leaders' negative attitudes about others' performance. Attitude theory is useful, therefore, in considering the way in which educational leaders frame the concerns they face as they carry out their roles. While attitude theory uses continua with extremes to describe attitudes (good–bad or favorable–unfavorable), our research questions about concerns pay particular attention to attitudes at the negative end of the good–bad continuum.

Since educational leaders are increasingly required to function as instructional leaders, their role demands making evaluative judgments of others, some of which generate concerns that require attention. That leads us to consider a further aspect of attitude theory in this research—the attitude system of interest. Evaluative judgments are more characteristic of the explicit than the implicit attitude system because the explicit attitude system involves slow, conscious judgments that are more likely to generate evaluations (Cunningham, Zelazo, Packer, & Van Bavel, 2007). The implicit attitude system, on the other hand, involves rapid, unconscious, attitudes that are robust across situations. Our research explores how concerns that might arise from evaluating others with the explicit attitude system are expressed in different contexts—private and public—in relation to two dimensions of attitudes—the attitude object and the strength of the evaluative judgment. On each of these dimensions we are interested in the consistency in the way concerns are addressed in private and public (Table 1).

THE ATTITUDE OBJECT

Banaji and Heiphetz's (2010) definition of attitudes signals that attitude objects may be people, other living beings, things, events, or ideas. In the context of this study, the beings that are evaluated could be principals, teachers, teaching assistants, or school support staff. Things that are evaluated might be lesson plans, classroom environments, assessment reports, or school review documentation. Events could be teaching approaches, professional development processes, or other leadership activities; and ideas might be philosophical beliefs about learners, learning, and teaching. The attitude object we focus on in this study is people (teachers, principals, or

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TABLE 1 Framework for Considering Consistency of Evaluative Judgments Evident in Leaders' Expressions of Concerns.

Inconsistent		Consistent
Attitude object concern different in public/private contexts	Person or situation of	Person or situation of concern same in public/private contexts
Strength of evaluative judgment	Variable strength—significantly weaker or stronger in public/private contexts in relation to the dimensions of certainty, seriousness, or judgmental orientation	Similar in public/private contexts

others working in school contexts) and situations involving those people who cause their leader concern.

THE STRENGTH OF EVALUATIVE JUDGMENTS

The notion of a good–bad continuum draws attention to the strength of the negative evaluation. While concerns are all likely to fall to the “bad” side of the continuum, the degrees of concern are important to attend to. It is worthwhile to consider if there is mild, moderate, or strong negative judgment about an attitude object when a concern is expressed, and if the strength of the evaluative judgment is different when expressed privately versus to the person in question.

The purpose of this study, given the literature about the prevalence of concerns and leaders' difficulties in resolving them, is to examine the nature of concerns—what they are about, how long they persist, how important they are considered to be, and the success of prior attempts to resolve them through conversation. In addition, we examine how concerns are framed in both private and public contexts and consider how differences in framing between those contexts might account for limited success in the resolution of concerns.

METHOD

In this section we outline our research questions and the procedures used to answer them. The approach used was a mixed-methods one in which participants' written descriptions of concerns were categorized quantitatively to generate descriptive analyses. Descriptions were also qualitatively analyzed to explore changes in how concerns were expressed between private and public settings.

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While there are strong theoretical and empirical grounds for claiming the importance of resolving concerns, research on the nature of educational leaders' concerns is somewhat limited. Not enough is known about the content of leaders' concerns (detail in relation to the circumstance of particular concern situations) or the characteristics of concerns (how long they have persisted and the impact of attempts to address them). Prior research has contributed to our understanding of how leaders respond to problem scenarios, but little is known about how leaders frame the authentic concerns they face in their own contexts. Given that concerns about educators in school contexts are likely to be related, to at least some extent, to the quality of teaching and learning, research in this area is important. Understanding how leaders are likely to frame concerns provides insights for those interested in improving the effectiveness of concern resolution in schools. The following research questions seek a deeper understanding of the nature of concerns educational leaders face and the quality of their efforts to resolve them.

1. What is the content of concerns educational leaders have about people they are responsible for?
2. What are the characteristics of these concerns? This question relates to how long concerns have persisted, how important leaders consider their resolution, how complex they are, and the difficulty and effectiveness of leaders' prior attempts to resolve them through conversation. We also examine the relationship between characteristics to establish, for example, if the level of importance about a concern is related to the effectiveness or difficulty of leaders' prior conversations about that concern.
3. How do educational leaders frame the concerns they have about others in private and public contexts? This question seeks to compare how leaders describe the content and strength of their concerns in private and public contexts.

The Sample

The sample comprised volunteers from three groups of educational leaders who had responsibility for the improvement of teaching and learning. These included principals, other school leaders, and superintendents. Characteristics of the three groups in the sample are summarized in Appendix A. The inclusion of superintendents in the sample acknowledges the more recent tendency in some systems for superintendents' roles to encompass direct work with principals in schools on matters of teaching and learning improvement (Honig, 2012). The participants were all taking part in professional learning interventions aimed at improving leaders' capability in resolving concerns through conversations that were deeply respectful of the

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person and effective in addressing the issues. The theory and practice of such open-to-learning conversations (OTLC) has been described elsewhere (Robinson & Le Fevre, 2011).

The principals ($n = 22$) were recruited through an invitation given to 31 principals who had opted to take part in a four-hour OTLC workshop offered as part of a broader 18-month experienced principals' development program. The other school leaders ($n = 28$) were recruited through an invitation to 31 participants in a postgraduate educational leadership course that had a total of 24 hours of lectures and an assessment focused on OTLC. The superintendents ($n = 27$) were recruited at the outset of a series of three workshops totaling 17 hours, focused on helping them learn and use OTLC to improve their influence in working with principals and schools. Participation in the research was voluntary for all participants. All data were collected prior to or during the initial session of the OTLC intervention, so the focus here is not on the impact of the intervention but on their initial approach to and perceptions of their concerns.

The use of volunteers could be considered a limitation of the research since volunteers may not be representative of the population and, if so, our findings could not be generalized beyond this particular study. To the extent that participation in social research requires free and informed consent, all research samples comprise volunteers. In regard to the representativeness of the participants in our study, for two of the groups involved (experienced principals and other leaders) the participants may not be entirely representative of the wider population of school leaders. The problem, however, as we see it is not to establish a match between the participants and the sample in terms of demographics, because there is no theoretical or empirical reason to suggest that demographics are related to leaders' performance concerns and their framing. Rather, we consider the problem of generalization to be one of establishing the extent to which those volunteers are representative of the group from which they are drawn with respect to the question at hand. Is there any reason to believe that the nature and framing of concerns of our sample is likely to be different from those of non-volunteers? One might suggest that their inclination to participate in professional learning or academic coursework (of the type described above) may bias our findings. It could be argued, however, that those who volunteered to take part in our study are likely to have higher capability and greater effectiveness than the general population of school leaders, since they were interested and motivated enough to opt in to both the professional learning and the associated research. Any findings from our volunteers, therefore, about issues of capability and effectiveness are likely to be just as applicable, if not more so, to the wider population of school leaders.

The superintendents group, however, was the entire population of superintendents from an Australian state for whom the professional learning was compulsory, and all of them also agreed to participate in the

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research. Across the three participants groups, we consider our sample to represent leaders with a range of leadership experience—experienced school principals, less senior school leaders typically newer to leadership, and superintendents who had experienced both school and region-wide leadership—and therefore, a range of experience in relation to handling concerns.

Data Sources

A questionnaire was developed (Appendix B) that included both open-ended and rating-scale items. The first item asked participants to describe in detail at least one concern about a person, such as a performance or ethical concern, which they currently held in their leadership role. The superintendent subgroup was asked to nominate five such concerns whilst the other two subgroups were asked about one concern. In all cases, each of the concerns was then rated by participants using the response categories outlined in Table 2. They were asked to indicate the duration of the concern and its perceived importance, whether or not they had already attempted to resolve it, and if so, their perceived effectiveness in—and difficulty of—those prior attempts. They were also asked to provide demographic information (outlined in Appendix B).

Additionally, immediately following the completion of the questionnaire, the superintendents were asked to engage in a scenario—with a fellow superintendent role playing the person who had been described as the focus of the superintendent's concern—to rehearse a conversation in which they would raise and address the concern they had described. The scope of the intervention they were participating in allowed us to gather data on this activity for the superintendent group only. It is true that, from a research point of view, role-plays have some limitations when compared to data from authentic situations. Superintendents may well have not behaved exactly as they might have in a real conversation with the actual person they had a concern about. Anecdotal evidence from participants, however, suggests that the difference in the quality of their efforts to address concerns in scenario and real situations is in the direction of better performance in the scenario situation. We also went to great lengths to ensure that those playing the role of the person about whom the leader had the concern were trained to provide authentic responses. Each superintendent briefed the colleague playing the role of someone they were concerned about to ensure they portrayed a sense of that person's typical response patterns in the role-play conversation. These conversations and a brief spoken reflection by the superintendent afterward were recorded. While this study draws on transcripts of scenario conversations, future research could usefully draw on data from public contexts that are authentic (actual conversations between leaders and those with whom

TABLE 2 Variables Used in the Analyses.

Data Focus Kind	Data	Variables (Quantitative) and Data Type (Qualitative)	Data Type (Categories/Scale Descriptors/Response Option) Question	Research
Concern description	Qualitative	Concern description as outlined in questionnaire	[open ended response]	RQ1;RQ3
Concern content categories	Quantitative	Effectiveness Capability Behavior Attitude Relationships	Yes; no Yes; no Yes; no Yes; no	RQ1
Concern characteristics	Quantitative	Duration	<6 months; 6–12 months; 1–2 years; 2–4 years; 4+ years	RQ2
		Not at all important; slightly important; somewhat important; very important; extremely important 1; 2; 3; 4; 5 (A count of the number of content categories involved in the concern)		
Attempts made to address the concern			Yes; no	
Difficulty of prior conversation attempts			Not at all difficult; slightly difficult; somewhat difficult; very difficult; extremely difficult	
Effectiveness of prior conversation attempts			Ineffective; minimally effective; satisfactorily effective; highly effective; extremely effective	

(Continued)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Data Focus	Data Kind	Variables (Quantitative) and Data Type (Qualitative)	Data Type (Categories/Scale Descriptors/Response Option)	Research Question
Concern-holder demographics	Quantitative	Gender	Female; male	RQ1
Postgraduate Diploma/Certificate; Masters		Highest qualification	Less than Bachelors; Bachelors;	
Years of experience			0–2 years; 3–5 years; 6–10 years;	
11–15 years; 16+ years				
Qualitative	Concern description (as described in public during rehearsal conversation)		[Transcript excerpt]	RQ3
Concern description (as described in private in questionnaire and during reflection on rehearsal conversation)			[Transcript excerpt]	

they have concerns) and capture how people respond in real situations. Nevertheless, the scenario transcripts used in this study provide a great deal of insight into the interpersonal capabilities of leaders that capture some important conditions that influence how people seek to address concerns.

An overview of variables used to answer the research questions is presented in Table 2. The following section outlines the qualitative and quantitative analyses (including inter-coder agreement) undertaken in order to establish the content and characteristics of leaders' concerns and to examine how leaders frame them in private and public contexts.

The Content of Educational Leaders' Concerns About Others

Initial analysis was carried out to code each concern described in the questionnaire according to its content or type. Coders asked "What is this concern about? What is its content?" An inductive approach was used to identify five categories of concern content following a series of analyses in which emerging themes were collapsed and split. The final set of content categories included effectiveness, capability, behavior, attitude, and relationships. Coding rules for each of these categories are outlined in Appendix C. Concerns involving two or more content categories were multi-coded.

To determine inter-coder agreement, a second coder coded a 14% ($n = 11$) random sample of concerns following training in the application of the coding rules. Percentage agreement between the two coders was calculated separately for each concern content category. Mean agreement across all five categories was 91%, which indicates a very high level of agreement between coders. When proportion agreement was calculated for individual concern content categories, agreement was between 82% and 100%. The lowest agreement was for concerns coded about *effectiveness*, and the highest for concerns coded about *capability*. For concerns coded to the categories of behavior, attitude, and relationships, agreement was 91%. Despite the high proportion of agreement it was important to be mindful that, since there were only two coding options for each category (yes and no), the limitations of a proportional agreement approach should be considered—in particular the possibility that much of the agreement is explained by chance (Gorden, 1992). To examine the role of chance in explaining the high percentage agreement between our coders we carried out two additional procedures. The first was a quantitative procedure, the calculation of Krippendorff's alpha (0.74) for the 55 data points coded by both coders. While that figure falls just short of the 0.8 threshold commonly treated as the threshold for high reliability, it is important to note that the calculation did not take account of the multiple category coding that was allowed for each concern in order to capture concern complexity. The second procedure was a qualitative one, an important additional strategy particularly given arguments by some that quantitative measures of agreement are not always

appropriate to the interpretive enterprise of qualitative research (Saldana, 2013).

We sought to establish whether the high proportion agreement was due to chance, or to genuine agreement about the interpretation and the substantive aspects of the coding categories. For concerns where coders had agreed on the presence of at least one category, each coder identified the key word/s in the concern that had prompted her to code against the categories their selected category. Discussion and comparison of those key words, the meanings of those words in relation to the coding rules, and qualitative decisions about coding established that agreement was in all cases due to a match in their reasoning and interpretation of the coding categories. For example, in the concern about “the way this teacher speaks to students and her work colleagues. I believe this hinders her teaching and respect from colleagues,” both coders highlighted “speaks” as the critical word indicating a concern in the “behavioral” category. Similarly, both highlighted “to students and her work colleagues” as indicating the concern was also in the “relationships” category since it involved other people. The high proportion agreement together with the close to 0.8 Krippendorff’s alpha statistic, and the commonalities in coding reasoning, led us to consider the reliability to be more than satisfactory.

To answer the question about the content of concerns, a frequency analysis was carried out determining the percentage of concerns assigned to each content category. A measure of concern complexity was determined by counting the number of content categories present in each of the concerns. For example, a concern coded only to the behavior category had a complexity score of one. A concern coded to three categories because it was about, for example, behavior, attitude, and relationships had a complexity score of three. There was no limit to how many of the five content categories each concern could be coded to.

The Characteristics of Concerns

Percentages were calculated for each of the response categories for the concern characteristic variables (One-Way ANOVAs and Bonferroni corrected post-hoc tests where required were carried out to determine for which variables the three leader groups could be analyzed together, and which required separate analyses). Mean scores were also calculated for those variables originally rated on a five-point scale. All tests of statistical significance used non-directional (two-tailed) tests with an alpha of .05 being the criterion for a significant result (since there is a paucity of literature investigating educational leader concerns and we had no hypothesis regarding the direction of differences or nature of between-group difference).

For the three concern characteristics in which mean scores were able to be computed (concern importance, effectiveness of prior attempt, difficulty

of prior attempt), Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to determine whether there were significant relationships between them. We were interested, for example, to assess whether high ratings of a concern's importance were related to ratings of difficulty or effectiveness.

Leaders' Framing of Concerns About Others in Private and Public Contexts

Our final research question led us to consider the way in which leaders frame concerns and in particular to compare how concerns are framed in private and public contexts. To address this question, we analyzed data from three sources provided by only the superintendent group. The more limited nature of the intervention contexts that principals and school leaders were involved in precluded us from gathering these additional data from those groups. The first source was questionnaire responses to the open-ended question asking the leader to describe their concern. The second was transcripts of conversations in which leaders were practicing addressing the concern by having a rehearsal conversation with a colleague playing the role of the other person. The third data source was reflections on those conversations recorded by leaders immediately following the rehearsal conversation. Eighteen of the participants (the group of superintendents) had data from all three sources and were therefore included in this part of the analyses.

The questionnaire response and reflection sources were treated as private contexts. By private contexts we mean those in which a leader has outlined his or her concern with no other person present and with no other intended audience except the researcher. That was the case both for the questionnaire response, in which leaders individually provided their response through an online system, and for the reflection, which was recorded privately following the rehearsal conversation. The rehearsal conversation, while involving a colleague in a role rather than the actual person with whom they had the concern, was deemed public for several reasons. It involved expressing the concern out loud to another person. Both the leader and the person who was in role as the object of the concern were trained to behave in role-play, to the extent possible, just as they would in the real situation.

In the transcripts we first identified segments from the rehearsal conversation (public) or reflection (private) in which the leader was describing or explaining their concern. We combined those segments in separate files for each leader along with their original questionnaire description of the concern (private). We were then able to compare how they described the object of the concern, and the strength of the evaluative judgment in the two different contexts (private and public). That comparison led us to notice patterns in the consistency or inconsistency of framing (stronger/weaker evaluative judgment or same/different object of concern) in the two different contexts.

In this article we report an overview of findings about the difference or consistency in expression of those two elements for the 18 cases included in this analysis. There were deemed to be differences in the strength of the evaluative judgment if the language, expression, or emphasis of the concern was stronger or weaker in either the private or the public contexts. Where the strength of the evaluative judgment was similar across those contexts, the case was categorized as being consistent.

Variance in the strength of evaluative judgment was evident in relation to three dimensions—certainty, seriousness, and judgmental orientation. First, we paid attention to whether leaders either expressed a concern with greater certainty in one context than the other (e.g. if they shifted from definite, clearly expressed negative views in one context to tentative or ambiguous views in the other context). Second, we checked to see if they indicated differing levels of seriousness in each context (e.g. if they shifted from extremely serious views in one context, to more moderated or even positively leaning views in the other context). Finally, we considered whether they were particularly judgmental of the other person in one context (e.g. through negatively judging their behavior, attitudes, capability of effectiveness in one context) but protective of them in the other (emphasizing concern for their feelings, health, well-being). The following example was coded as showing a shift in the strength of evaluative judgment across contexts:

Private context: “A new leader, never been principal before who has been in the job for a few weeks has gone in, mentioned his previous site many times, is not listening to the staff, making changes . . . ” [S21]

Public context: “We spoke about how important it is to come into the new site and just listen and take time to get to know people and just observe. So how is that going? [S21]

The example shows how the concern expression varies in regard to seriousness and judgmental orientation. It is expressed in a more moderated way in public, since the focus is on the desired practice (taking time to listen when new to a school) rather than about the practice the leader is concerned about—the prevalence of the principal’s references to his previous school. The judgmental orientation also shifts—from a negative stance toward the principal’s tendency to focus on his previous workplace, not listen, and leap to make changes (expressed in the private context), to a more protective stance signaled by the question “So how is that going?” (asked in the public context). Use of the question, we argue, seeks to protect the principal by avoiding confronting him with the concern and is inconsistent with the strongly judgmental nature of the concern expressed in private about the inappropriateness of his practices given how recently he was appointed to the new school.

There were deemed to be differences in the object of concern if the content of the concern was not consistent across contexts either in the general content category (e.g. the concern was framed in one context about behavior and in another about attitude) or in the detail (e.g. the concern was about a particular behavior in one context, and a different particular behavior in the other). Where a case was found to be consistent in both, strength of evaluative judgment and for the attitude object, the case was categorized as being consistent overall.

FINDINGS

The following section reports quantitative findings about concern content and characteristics followed by qualitative findings about the framing of concerns.

Content of Concerns

The majority of the 77 concerns were about behavior. Close to a third were about others' attitudes and the same proportion about relationships. The least frequent content categories were effectiveness and capability. The proportions for all content categories are outlined in Table 3.

A measure of concern complexity was determined by counting the number of content categories present in each of the concerns. More than 60% of concerns involved one content category—for example, “the acting principal is disorganized in the day-to-day running of the school . . .” [S17] was categorized as about behavior (disorganized). The remaining concerns (close to 40%) were more complex (coded to two or more content categories), such as the example outlined in the following quotation:

A leader, who moved to a bigger school, doesn't listen to staff and is not willing to accept that she is struggling. Uses her past to say that she has been successful for many years as a leader and therefore there is nothing wrong with her style of leading. Defaults to blaming others. My concern is that I attempted to intervene by seeking information from the staff (who approached me when she was unwell and absent for a few weeks), and I find it hard to use that info, as she claims she was harassed (treated unfairly due to being away at the time of the interviews) as she was sick at the time. [S21]

This example highlights concerns coded as being about three categories—behavior (not listening), attitude (unwillingness), and relationships (subordinates reported issues). The number and percentage of concerns at each level of concern complexity are outlined in Table 4.

TABLE 3 Concern Content.

Concern Content Categories	Number and Percentage of Concerns ($n = 77$)
Behavior	52 (67.5%)
Attitude	28 (36.4%)
Relationship	28 (36.4%)
Effectiveness	21 (27.3%)
Capability	16 (20.8%)

TABLE 4 Concern Complexity.

Number of Concern Content Categories (Number of Identified Issues)	Number and Percentage of Concerns ($n = 77$)
1	29 (38.2%)
2	27 (35.5%)
3	16 (21.1%)
4	4 (5.3%)
5	0 (0%)

Characteristics of Concerns

In terms of the length of time leaders had held a concern, 66.7% had persisted for up to one year. Concerns persisting for at least two years made up 21.7%, and concerns persisting between two and four years made up 7.2%. Concerns persisting more than four years made up less than five percent (4.3%).

Educational leaders were likely to have made prior attempts at addressing their concerns, with 90.5% indicating they had done so. Their attempts, however, were typically reported to have not been very effective, with nearly two-thirds (62.5%) of leaders indicating their prior attempts had been “ineffective” or “minimally effective.” None of the leaders indicated their prior attempts had been “extremely effective,” although a small proportion (14.1%) indicated their attempts had been “highly effective.” The remaining nearly one-quarter (23.4%) indicated that their prior attempts had been “satisfactorily effective” in resolving the concern. The mean rating for effectiveness in resolving the concern was 2.39 ($SD = 0.88$). This rating is closest to a two, corresponding with a response option of “minimally effective.”

For concerns in which prior attempts had been made, 73.9% were given a difficulty rating for a conversation aimed at resolving the concern. More than half (53.5%) of those conversations were reported as being “very” or “extremely” difficult. The mean and standard deviation were 3.15 and 1.08 respectively, a mean that corresponds with the response option of “somewhat difficult.”

Due to significant differences ($F(2, 71) = 3.47, p = .04$) between the response of participants in the three groups (superintendents, $M = 4.46, SD = .83$; experienced principals, $M = 4.36, SD = .58$; senior leaders, $M = 3.93, SD = .86$) about the importance of resolving the concerns, that variable was analyzed for each group separately. The vast majority of superintendents (91.3%) and experienced principals (95.5%) indicated it was “very” or “extremely” important to resolve the concerns. In contrast, fewer senior leaders placed high importance on resolving the concerns. This was indicated by 60.7% of the concerns being deemed “very” or “extremely” important to resolve.

The Relationship Between Concern Characteristics

For the three concern characteristics, effectiveness of prior conversations, difficulty of prior conversations, and importance of resolving the concern, bivariate correlations were undertaken to determine whether scores associated with the characteristics were significantly related to one another.

EFFECTIVENESS OF PRIOR CONVERSATIONS AND DIFFICULTY OF THOSE CONVERSATIONS

A moderately weak significant negative relationship was seen between ratings of effectiveness of prior conversation attempts and difficulty of those attempts ($r = -.274, p = .038$). This suggests that as difficulty of the conversation increases, there is a decrease in the effectiveness in resolving the concerns.

IMPORTANCE OF RESOLVING THE CONCERN AND EFFECTIVENESS OF PRIOR CONVERSATIONS

As scores for importance of resolving the concerns were shown to differ significantly between groups, analyses were carried out for each subsample separately.

Superintendents. A weak (but not significant) positive relationship was evident between ratings of importance of resolving the concerns and effectiveness of prior conversations ($r = .060, p = .718$). As the relationship was weak (and near zero), it appears that for this group the effectiveness of prior conversations is not associated with the importance of resolving the concerns.

Experienced principals. For the experienced principals, a moderately strong negative relationship was seen between ratings of importance of resolving the concerns and effectiveness of prior conversation ($r = -.436, p = .070$). While not significant (which may be due to the reduced size of this sample), the relationship was nearing significance. For this group, there is a tendency for more important concerns to have less effective outcomes.

Senior leaders. A moderately weak (but not significant) positive relationship was seen between ratings of importance of resolving the concerns and effectiveness of prior conversations ($r = .274, p = .218$). While not significant, there is a tendency for more important concerns to have more effective outcomes in this group.

IMPORTANCE OF RESOLVING THE CONCERN AND DIFFICULTY OF PRIOR CONVERSATIONS

The groups were analyzed separately for the relationship between importance of resolving the concern and effectiveness of prior conversations. For all three groups, the relationship between how important they felt the concern was to resolve and the difficulty they reported in their prior attempts to do so was weak or moderately weak, positive and not significant. For superintendents the relationship was near zero ($r = .066, p = .764$), indicating that for this group difficulty of prior conversations was not associated with importance of resolving the concerns. For experienced principals ($r = .245, p = .343$) and senior leaders ($r = .284, p = .239$), the relationships was stronger, indicating that, for those leaders, concerns deemed more important to resolve are more difficult to have conversations about.

The Framing of Concerns in Private and Public Contexts

The quantitative analysis outlined above revealed that concerns considered important to resolve often go unresolved for too long, and leaders report a great deal of difficulty in making attempts to resolve them. We hypothesized that those issues may, at least in part, be due to the way in which leaders frame concerns and, in particular, to the way that framing differs in private and public contexts. The qualitative phase of this study sought to closely analyze those differences in the expression of leaders' actual concerns in order to consider how that framing might contribute to patterns of concerns remaining unresolved and leaders' difficulty in resolving them.

Eleven of the 18 superintendents framed their concerns somewhat differently in the private and public contexts we examined. Most of them ($n = 9$) expressed either one of the dimensions (the attitude object, and strength of evaluative judgment) distinctly differently in the private and public contexts, while two framed both dimensions quite differently. Seven superintendents were consistent in the way they expressed both dimensions of the concern.

Where the differences were in the strength of the evaluative judgment ($n = 6$) the shift was, in all cases, in the direction of a weaker framing of the concern in public than in private—in other words, in private the concerns were described as much more certain, serious, urgent, or problematic. For example, in private one leader [S09] described his concern with an experienced principal “who simply believes that no one really understands the complexities of working in a low SES [socioeconomic status] community.

She resists the support of outside support staff.” There is certainty evident in the framing of her concern through use of the term “simply.” The attitude also seems fixed given the phrasing “she resists,” which implies a view that the concern applies across multiple contexts. In the public context, however (when describing the concern in a rehearsal conversation), the concern is introduced in the following way: “It would be really good if we did a bit of an update of where things are in relation to the [schoolwide] review recommendations.” In this example, the strength of the evaluative judgment in public is reduced through the more tentative language (“a bit of” and “things”) and through a focus on procedural matters (needing to do an update) rather than on the substantive concern.

A similarly more moderated judgment was evident in another leader’s framing of their concern [S10]. In private the superintendent expressed a very strong negative attitude about a school principal’s own attitude, their behavior, and their effectiveness. The superintendent’s description of the concern was as follows:

Constant defensiveness and conspiracy theory connected to the leadership of a large school, led by an experienced and highly paid principal. Unwilling or unable to lead improvement and the way the principal approaches any issue from a passive/aggressive manner—despite at least three lengthy discussions about her behavior and style and the need to move forward or if burnt out, to consider other options—no change!! Other leaders see her behavior as intimidating and threatening. She always apologizes—after burning someone verbally—and I have told her this is not good enough. Intellectually she knows; emotionally, it does not alter what and how she acts. Believes regional staff and state office are all idiots who do not support her school. Also believes no one knows low SES like she and her low-SES colleagues and that they are different. It makes meaningful discussions about improvement in achievement for students very difficult to get to, let alone engage in genuine and mutually respectful dialogue. [S10, questionnaire response]

A strong negative evaluation is apparent in the attributions about personality and accusatory tone (“unwilling or unable”), the clinical labeling (“passive/aggressive”), and the fixedness of the attitude (“she always . . .”).

In public, the leader does raise the concern about behavior, but it is framed around a particular incident rather than the more serious concern about constant, ongoing undesirable behavior (“she always . . .”) evident across multiple contexts and involving many colleagues. In this example the attitude object is also different. The privately expressed concern about behavior and attitude was somewhat moderated when described publicly to emphasize concern about the principal’s health and credibility:

What happened at the meeting, the leadership, regional secondary principals meeting the other day, where you really got stuck into Jude, was, it was, and she was really upset and felt really embarrassed. And I think we really need to talk about it, because I'm seeing a pattern of this kind of behavior that's occurring. This is about the third time we've talked about it and I'm concerned about your health, I'm concerned about your credibility. [S10]

A shift in attitude object is problematic when it leads to misunderstanding the nature of the real concern. We noted inconsistency in the description of the attitude object in the data for seven of the 27 superintendents. Another superintendent was concerned about a principal who was having a negative impact on a group of four other principals. The superintendent expressed a concern, in private, that the principal was promoting a view that the group members "don't have to do what the region tells us." This superintendent was particularly concerned about "the relationships between the region and these sites [schools]." In public, however, that concern was just hinted at through reference to previous "healthy debate," but the leader did not clearly signal her concern about either the relationships between the principals' group and the region, or about the individual principal. Rather, the public framing focused on the aspirations of the group members and not on the superintendent's concerns about the behaviors that she believed would undermine them:

And really pleased that what's on the agenda today is a continuing focus of our work for the region about how we improve pedagogy to engage 21st-century learners. And you all know that there's been quite a lot of, I call it healthy debate, I'll [be] pleased to get some input today about a number of things related to this improvement priority. And I'll say for the region, but of course I'll declare my position here that the region is all of us, including this little group, and of course everybody, so our work is around this as a priority. And the proposal that's come to leaders about developing a tool, a commonly used tool across all sites to get learner feedback in terms of what learners think about and can tell us about the pedagogy of their teachers. [S23]

Another way in which the attitude object shifts from private to public contexts is in the move to describing the concern as involving "we"—diffusing the foci to both the leader and the other person involved, rather than a more honest expression of the concern as being about the leader. For example, one leader described their concern privately as being "about a principal who is in crisis and lacks skills in strategic thinking and that she needs to constantly highlight her plight and have her problems solved through extra resources" [S24]. Yet in public, the accountability becomes distinctly shared by both the leader and the principal, as can be seen in the reference to "we" in the following extract:

Valerie, I'm really concerned about how *we're* going with this strategic thinking aspect to your school development. Remember *we've* spoken about it previously, about needing to remake the system and create a system that is robust and has, and develop the leadership density of your school, so that you're not going from crisis to crisis. And I feel like *we've* sort of gone back again into another one of those slumps that you and I have talked about previously. And I'd just like to explore with you today about where your thinking is with that, and how I can support you developing your thinking further. [S24]

While the turn to "we" could potentially indicate a sharing of commitment to work together to solve the problem, in this context it seems likely the shift to "we" is instead used to avoid expressing the concern and honestly indicating that the concern is about the effectiveness of the principal.

DISCUSSION

Our findings confirm previous studies which show that the concerns of educational leaders are complex, persistent, and difficult to address. The majority of reported concerns were about others' behavior (68%), and this category of concern is considered to be more difficult to resolve than concerns about attitudes, relationships, effectiveness, or capability.

By including leaders of various types (principals, other school leaders such as deputy or associate principals, and superintendents) in this study, we have highlighted how the challenges of effectively addressing concerns apply across leadership roles. The only significant difference between the three leader groups lies in their importance ratings, with the school leader group (those with least seniority and responsibility) rating their nominated concerns as less important to resolve than the experienced principals and superintendents, who were more likely to rate them as "very" or "extremely" important to resolve. While this finding suggests that senior leaders may take resolution of their concerns more seriously than their more junior colleagues, they are just as likely to report lack of success in resolving them. This suggests that a focus on building capability for problem solving is as important for superintendent as it is for principals and other school leaders. We cannot generalize from our findings to educational leaders' more general capability in problem solving, for this is a study of unresolved problems, not of those they may have already solved. Nevertheless, the duration, importance, and reported difficulty of resolving those ongoing concerns suggests that leaders struggle to make headway with a proportion of the issues for which they are responsible. Our earlier discussion of the literature strongly suggests that delayed and ineffective resolution of problems has negative consequences for trust of leaders, teacher evaluation processes, instructional leadership, and student outcomes.

In order to change this situation we need to understand more about what makes these concerns so difficult to resolve and how those difficulties can be overcome. While our study had little to say about the latter, our comparison of the public and private framing of concerns may provide some important new insights into the cause of leaders' difficulties. Our previous examples comparing leaders' private thoughts with their public expressions confirmed the prediction of accountability theory that leaders' public statements of their concerns would be more moderate, diplomatic versions of their private thoughts. In some cases, both the strength and the object of their concern were altered. Such "diplomacy" is problematic because the conversation then proceeds on the basis of different understanding of the issues. Furthermore, a leader's indirectness and diplomacy may arouse mistrust and suspicion of a hidden agenda. The problem persists, even though several conversations have been attempted, because the issues have not been clearly disclosed.

The solution to the diplomacy problem, however, is more complicated than just advising leaders to be more direct. When private thoughts about others are framed in judgmental, generalized terms, as they were in several of our earlier examples, their more direct expression can produce exactly the negative emotions that leaders wish to avoid. The issue is not just to make the private public, but to frame the private in a way that makes its public expression both honest and respectful. The research of Argyris and Schön (1974, 1996) on interpersonal effectiveness helps us to understand why honesty and respect are so difficult to integrate, and hence why leaders are often caught in a dilemma between how to make progress on the problem (substantive goal) while avoiding damaging the relationship (relationship goal; Robinson & Le Fevre, 2011). Their research has shown that when people anticipate that their messages will be unwelcome, they typically communicate them in face-to-face situations using a generic pattern of interpersonal behavior called Model

1. The essence of Model 1 is that it involves unilateral control of both the process and content of the conversation in the interest of both "winning" and doing so while generating as little negative emotion as possible.

The dilemma between relationship and task goals is exacerbated, if not created, in Model 1 because seeking to win, that is, to persuade others of the validity of one's views without exploring difference and disagreement, is deeply disrespectful. Being more diplomatic, by moderating the public expression of one's concerns, does not resolve the dilemma because, while the relationship may be temporarily protected, the validity of the perceived concerns is assumed rather than tested, and such assumptions jeopardize the quality of problem solving.

In the following example we illustrate how a Model 1 approach contributes to the ineffectiveness of a superintendent's attempts to resolve his concern. In the private context, the superintendent [S16] reports that one of his principals is struggling to make the changes required to address the

declining enrollments at his school. In public, however, he disguises his concern by empathizing with the principal about the enrollment decline and asking a series of questions about the principal's reactions to the decline.

How have you found it working in a school where your enrolments have seriously declined? . . . How are you? How's everybody coping? It must be difficult to, you know, when you've done a lot of preparation, great work being done in the school and there's just not enough people there to benefit from what you're offering. [S16]

The object of the concern has shifted from the principal's own leadership of change to the situation that has brought about the need for change. That approach, while perhaps well-intentioned, is defensive, for it protects the superintendent from providing the principal with an account of why he believes the principal is not effective in his change leadership, and from publicly testing his views.

The superintendent's approach is illustrative of Model 1 values of winning (by protecting his views of the principal's leadership from public testing), and doing so while minimizing, generating, or expressing negative feelings (by not disclosing his concern and instead praising the principal for "great work").

The dilemma between honest discussion of the issue and not damaging the relationship is avoided by changing the taken-for-granted assumption that one's own views are correct and replacing it with a genuine commitment to involving the other person in inquiring into the validity of *all* the competing views. This involves adopting an alternative pattern of interaction, which Argyris and Schön (1974) call Model 2. While widely espoused, this pattern of interaction is rarely evident in difficult conversations without interventions involving coaching and feedback designed to overcome the defensive patterns of reasoning that are characteristic of Model 1 (Argyris, 1990). The values of winning and avoiding negative emotions are replaced with the value of seeking valid information through rigorous and collaborative inquiry into the validity of assumptions about the nature, cause, and solutions of concerns. Feelings and relationships are jointly and publicly rather than privately and unilaterally managed. Conversations that enact these values should make progress on the problem *and* maintain or enhance the relationship.

Possibilities for future research that arise from these findings relate to both the substantive focus of the research and to the methodological approach. A focus on how concerns about different matters (effectiveness, capability, behavior, attitude, and relationships) impact on the teaching and learning experience of students, potentially through a case-study approach, would enable deeper understanding of the need for improved concern-resolution capability. Given our findings about the persistence of such

concerns, there is an argument for longitudinal studies of concern-resolution efforts. This would enable researchers to gather data that captures the nature of efforts to resolve concerns over time, and to examine the extent to which progress and solutions are sustained.

Finally, an important focus for future research is on interventions aimed at teaching people to think and behave in Model II ways as they seek to address their concerns. Building capability in the quality and pace of concern resolution involves far more than teaching leaders to be either more diplomatic or more direct. Either approach could make matters worse. The focus of any intervention should be on teaching leaders how to frame their concerns in respectful ways so they can be authentic in their disclosure and genuine in their collaborative inquiry into their nature, cause, and resolution. What are the critical elements of successful interventions and how do those interventions support deep change that can be applied in practice? How might professional learning be designed in ways that ensure that improved skills are transferred to real contexts and are sustained in the school settings where performance concerns occur? The design, delivery, and evaluation of such interventions could make a major contribution to reducing the seriousness and duration of leaders' unresolved educational concerns.

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APPENDIX A

Descriptive Characteristics of Educational Leaders in Three Subgroups.

	Superintendents (<i>n</i> = 27)	Experience d Principals (<i>n</i> = 22)	School Leaders (<i>n</i> = 28)
Age categories (years)			
Under 40 years	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	14 (50%)
40–49 years	1 (4%)	5 (23%)	7 (25%)
50–59 years	13 (48%)	11 (50%)	7 (25%)
60+ years	8 (30%)	6 (27%)	0 (0%)
Not specified	5 (19%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Gender			
Female	12 (44%)	15 (68%)	21 (75%)
Male	15 (56%)	7 (32%)	7 (25%)
Highest educational qualification			
Below bachelor's degree	1 (4%)	4 (18%)	2 (7%)
Bachelor's degree	6 (22%)	4 (18%)	17 (61%)
Postgraduate	5 (19%)	1 (5%)	8 (29%)
Diploma/Certificate			
Master's degree or higher	8 (30%)	12 (55%)	1 (4%)
Not specified	7 (26%)	1 (5%)	0 (0%)
Years of experience as a principal			
None	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	26 (93%)
Less than 3 years	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
3–5 years	0 (0%)	2 (9%)	0 (0%)
6–10 years	9 (33%)	8 (36%)	0 (0%)
11–15 years	3 (11%)	6 (27%)	0 (0%)
More than 15 years	7 (26%)	6 (27%)	1 (4%)
Not specified	8 (30%)	0 (0%)	1 (4%)
Years in current role			
0–2 years	2 (7%)	1 (5%)	n/a
3–5 years	11 (41%)	12 (55%)	
6–10 years	5 (19%)	4 (18%)	
11–15 years	1 (4%)	3 (14%)	
More than 15 years	1 (4%)	1 (5%)	
Not specified	7 (26%)	1 (5%)	
Years in role as senior manager			
None		0 (0%)	10 (36%)
Less than 3 years		3 (14%)	3 (11%)
3–5 years		5 (23%)	9 (32%)
6–10 years		11 (50%)	2 (7%)
11–15 years		0 (0%)	4 (14%)
More than 15 years		2 (9%)	0 (0%)
Not specified		1 (5%)	0 (0%)
Classroom teaching experience			
0–2 years	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
3–5 years	2 (7%)	2 (9%)	4 (14%)
6–10 years	8 (30%)	5 (23%)	14 (50%)
11–15 years	4 (15%)	6 (27%)	3 (11%)
More than 15 years	6 (22%)	8 (36%)	7 (25%)
Not specified	7 (26%)	1 (5%)	0 (0%)
School type			
Primary		17 (77%)	14 (50%)
Secondary		5 (22%)	12 (43%)
Not specified		0 (0%)	2 (7%)

APPENDIX B

Questionnaire
Items.

Item Sets	Items	Response Options
Concern content	Please describe the concern.	Open-ended
Concern characteristics the concern?	How long have you had	<6 months; 6–12 months; 1–2 years; 2–4 years; 4+ years Yes; no
Have you attempted to address the concern? How important is it to you that you resolve this?		Not at all important; slightly important; somewhat important; very important; extremely important
How difficult was the conversation?		Not at all difficult; slightly difficult; somewhat difficult; very difficult; extremely difficult
How effective do you think your conversation was?		Ineffective; minimally effective; satisfactorily effective; highly effective; extremely effective
Concern-holder demographics	Gender	Female; male
Please indicate your highest qualification type.		Less than Bachelors; Bachelors; Postgraduate Diploma/Certificate; Masters
How many years of experience do you have as a principal?		0–2 years; 3–5 years; 6–10 years; 11–15 years; 16+ years

APPENDIX C

Coding Rules for Concern Content Categories.

Content Category	Definition	Examples
Effectiveness	This is an evaluation of a summative nature that refers to the impact, result, outcome, or final achievement resulting from the work of the person with whom the leader has a concern or to their effectiveness in their role overall	“Student achievement results unsatisfactory” “Led to multiple complaints from parents”
Capability	This kind of concern makes a judgment about a person’s ability, skill, competence, readiness, or general capability for their role or for a particular task	“Doesn’t have the skills needed to . . . ” “Isn’t able to . . . ”
Behavior	Concern that relates to the way in which a person goes about their work such as the approach they take, their preparedness, or the manner in which they go about their tasks. Behavior concerns also relate to a lack of action—not carrying out desired behaviors.	“Always comes to meetings unprepared” “Refuses to participate in meeting discussions”
Attitude	Concern about the attitude another person is considered to hold, or their inclination or disposition	“Tends to get frustrated when requests are made” “Doesn’t like considering new teaching approaches” “Has trouble getting the team on board with new initiatives”
Relationships	Concern involving the relationship or interactions either between adults or between an adult and children. May be about a particular relationship/interaction between two individuals (e.g. the deputy principal and the junior math teacher), a particular group (e.g. the senior teaching team), or more general (relationships/ interactions between staff). Describing the actions of another person in a way that a relationship issue is implied is not sufficient to be deemed a relationship concern—the relationship itself or interaction approach needs to be specifically referred to as concerning	“Talks over people in meetings”